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The Double Sighted: Visibility, Identity, and Photographs on Facebook

by

Jeanette C. Vigliotti

**A thesis submitted to the Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English**

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CHAPTER 1 THE LOOKING GLASS: MYTHS OF THE SUBJECT

“The truth at last. He is myself! I feel it

I know my image now”

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

An Introduction

A Facebook user constructs identity through the photographs associated with the user’s profile. The ability to control what information is present on a profile often leads to an indictment of the Facebook identity as curated, inauthentic, shallow, and narcissistic.

Reactionary scholars, like Jean Twenge, who wrote *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled, and More Miserable than Ever* and *The Narcissist Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, often fixate on the medium of identity construction. By focusing solely on the alleged debilitating side effects of identity and selfhood in the age of social media, Twenge and other scholars become technological determinists, who promote a nostalgic myth of a cohesive, stable, and authentic identity that never existed.

Additionally, according to Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith in *Does Technology Drive History?: The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, technological determinists believe “the efficacy of technology [is] as a driving force of history” (x) and “that the social consequences of our technical ingenuity are...irreversible” (xi). Marx suggests in his chapter “The Idea of ‘Technology’ and Postmodern Pessimism” that the presence of technological determinism in the mythos of American culture emanates from the technologically induced disasters of the twentieth century, particularly those anxieties emerging post-Hiroshima. This loss of faith in progress

resulted in technological pessimism, which “refers to that sense of disappointment, anxiety, even menace, that the idea of technology arouses” (238). Many new media analyses subscribe to this technologically pessimistic vantage point and the “popular narrative” that deems technology as the supreme shaping force of society (X).¹ The perpetual preoccupation with the newness of the medium obscures other issues of identity. Moreover, I will argue that the fixation on newness of the medium and its allegedly narcissistic users should be interrogated as a smokescreen, a way of not confronting two larger, interconnected issues: the acknowledgement that all identity is a construction, and reflects a desire for immortality.

The echo effect of social media in dominant modes of discourse is dissonant, littered with voices of technological determinism. Those born after 1980 are generally identified as the Millennial generation. Millennials are admonished for their preference for onscreen communication. Twenge suggests that Millennials prefer to focus on themselves in isolation, and that the advent of social networking sites, like Facebook, allow for complete self-absorption. Twenge coined the term “Generation Me” to discuss the social habits of the Millennials. However, the tendency to label an entire generation as narcissistic inhibits any fair analysis of the current communication culture. Scholarship that analyzes rather than demonizes Facebook is necessary to assess the ways in which Facebook identity is produced. One way to achieve this balanced analysis is to refer to the Millennials not as members of “Generation Me” but as “digital natives.” Of these same Millennials, Marc Prensky writes in “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants” that the Millennials “are all ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (4). This switch from “Generation Me” to “digital natives”

¹ See Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain* for an in-depth exploration of technological pessimism in the Digital Age

acknowledges the Millennial's preference for onscreen communication without demonizing such actions.

Many scholars and theorists have already remarked on the ways in which social networking is changing the dynamics of human interaction: certainly, the last twenty years are a testament to the naturalization and domestication of the digital frontier through the physical presence of computers, laptops, tablets, cameras, and cell phones. The very idea of a "homepage" suggests that the spatial concept of home can translate into the intangible world of the digital. If such an intimate space is no longer confined to a physical location, it appears identity may no longer be confined to the physical body. Since the concept of identity in the digital age is already expansive, I will only speculate and theorize about Facebook identity construction with a concentration on the role of photographs within this specified social network. However, the role of cell phones, tablets, and other camera devices are also relevant to this discussion.

Facebook user photographs have a particular function in identity construction that is similar to the language of self-reflection and self-description. By combining theories of photography, postmodernism, technology, and visibility, I will displace the fixation on the newness of the medium in order to fully explore the implications of identity on Facebook. I will flesh out the components of Facebook identity— an identity I feel is best described as a photographic diary of daily life.

In order to properly discuss the presence of Facebook identity construction, I draw from Jacques Lacan's notion of a split subject, Jacques Derrida's concept of iterability in "Signature Event Context" and Barthes' assessment of authenticity in "Deliberation" to demonstrate the constructed nature of identity. I expand and revise Susan Sontag's *On Photography* and Barthes'

musings about analog photography in *Camera Lucida* and “The Rhetoric of the Image” to understand how photographs function on Facebook. Furthermore, I consider the studies of Sherry Turkle and Michel Foucault’s “Panopticism” in order to illuminate the operating rules of Facebook.

Identity in a Society of Visibility

I intend to trace the ways in which Facebook users enact panoptic impulses in order to produce the self within the social network. Through photographs, users form and constitute themselves in response to external performative functions. In order to understand the function of Facebook photographs we must first discuss the formation of the subject and the subject’s relationship to visibility.

In Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, he discusses the theory of panopticism; in examining Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault theorizes about the power the external gaze has over an individual. The anxiety of constant visibility “arrests or regulates movement” and causes the subject of the gaze to perform in normative ways (11). The observed becomes “the object of information, never a subject in communication” because the individual is created through an external pressure (3). For Foucault, the external pressure was the “exercise of power [that] may be supervised by society as a whole” (6). Society projects standards and rules onto the individual through panopticism causing those under observation to normalize their actions. In effect, this external gaze causes an individual to pose; therefore rendering such action inauthentic. As we move on, the issue of posturing will become important to our analysis.

For panopticism to survive in culture and “remain invisible,” the subject internalized the normalizing gaze of constant visibility (9). This internalizing move is precisely why “[o]ur society is one not of spectacle but surveillance” (10). Here Jacques Lacan adds to the importance of visibility in the construction of the self. We can use Lacan to understand how we internalized

the external gaze of surveillance in our methods of self-presentation. Moreover, we can view the ways in which the method of internalized surveillance manifests in Facebook identity presentation.

According to Nichols Mirzoeff in “The Subject of Visual Culture,” Lacan “turned this surveillance into self-surveillance, making each visual subject the locus of the panoptic drama of identity” (11). This external formation of identity is essential to Lacan’s exploration of the self. In *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Bruce Fink indicates “that the subject is never more than an assumption on our part,” which is to say, the subject, or ‘I’, is constituted through visibility, through outside observation (35). The word “observation” in this concept is deliberate—it recalls Jonathan Crary’s sentiments in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*: “*observare* means to ‘conform one’s action to comply with; as in observing rules, codes, regularities, and practices’” (5-6). The self in a society of surveillance is the product of the “new mantra of visual subjectivity: ‘I am seen and I see that I am seen’” (Mirzoeff 10).

But how do we negotiate this dualism of seeing and being seen? How does the experience of visibility effect the construction of the self? One of the ways to address these concerns is through Lacan’s theories on the split subject. While Foucault establishes that visibility transforms the subject into an “object of information,” Lacan demonstrates how the process of early childhood identification enacts this dichotomy of subject-as-object, or the self-as-other (Foucault 3). The experience of the self-as-object is revealed through Facebook identity construction because the nature of the Facebook profile occupies the spatial position of a mirror; alternatively, the self is constructed through exterior images. It is this third person gaze that occupies the contemporary concept of the self.

In Lacanian theory, the ego is externally formed through “a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images” (Fink 36). A child “sees him or herself in a mirror” and the parental units identify the reflection, “insisting to their infant that the image in the mirror *is* him or her” (Fink 36). This is significant because the child’s first experience with the idea of the self is one that is given by an external authoritative entity, through observation. The sense of self, or: the ego, is constructed through the act of linguistic identification and is thereby alienating. The parental external identification of the infant addresses the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic Order. For Lacan, the Symbolic Order is concerned with the implementation of language, and by extension, the rules and regulations of society. This external identification “brings about the internalization of mirror and other images (e.g., photographic images), for [the infant’s] primary due to the parents’ reaction to such an image” (Fink 36). More importantly, this initial concept of the self belongs to the parents, not the infant. This causes a fracture in the cohesive nature of the subject, causing infants to “experience themselves as an object which is seen” and identified through language (Lee 1).

Lacan suggests that language is responsible for the split subject. Because language is “tangentially or asymptotically our own,” an individual is forced to view the self as other (Fink 13). Fink offers that the “splitting of the I into the ego (false sense) and the unconscious brings into a being a surface, in essence, with two sides: one that is exposed and one that is hidden” (45). Lacan attributes the splitting of the subject as a function of language, which causes an individual to experience and observe the self as Other. If language performs this split and causes the self to experience a “double sense of seeing and being seen” (Mirzoeff 11) then the photographic language of Facebook only calls attention to the “uneasiness which seizes me when I look at ‘myself’ on a piece of paper” (Barthes *Camera Lucida* 13).

If, as Foucault suggests, discourse produces the subject and our present society is one of surveillance, then observation, as in one's newsfeed, is the key factor in contemporary identity. The dichotomy of seeing and being seen turns the self into a split subject, an "object of information" that is rendered consumable by society (Foucault 3). We are the product of societal projections and expectations. We believe them to be part of our "authentic" experience as individuals and so we project these identities outward. We, as split subjects, consume these external pressures, a process Sandy Stone identifies as "warranting" (399). In "Split Subjects, Not Atoms; Or How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis," Stone says warranting is "the production and maintenance of this link between a discursive space and physical space" (399).

On Facebook, these projections become data to be consumed by societal interactions; we become lists of our likes and dislikes and a list of marketable ads. The constant reporting of daily living affirms the normalcy of the Facebook user. They report the image via text or Facebook—this reporting externally validates the photographer's subjectivity through image-consumption and image-production.

Our status as visual subjects requires the double-sighted nature of seeing and being seen, a process that is literalized on Facebook. Twenge and Campbell classify the desire to post photographs on social networking sites as a cry for attention for the narcissist. However, by relegating this action narcissistic, the nature of visual subjectivity is left out. The culmination of Foucault's internalized panopticism and Lacan's split subject yields the visual subject. On Facebook, users invoke their visual subjectivity by posting and viewing photographs and posts.

Warranting is useful in describing the formation of the visual subject; it accounts for the ways in which meaning is "ascribed to the physical body, is produced by means of inscription, such as legal, medical, and psychological texts" (Stone 399). Stone suggests that the subject is a

“legible body,” meaning the subject is read by observers for the “social meaning of ‘body’ inscribed on its surface, presenting a set of cultural codes that organize the way of the body is understood and determine a range of socially appropriate responses” (399). Here, we witness how the subject is produced through panopticism, through the state of observation, and the weight of societal pressure. Modernity developed the visual subject, and it is the digital age that exposes this level of construction. It is the revelation of identity scaffolding that is most likely the real cause of anxiety about the Facebook identity, though this fear is displaced and made to seem like a new issue when Facebook users post photographs to their profile.

Authenticity and Its Discontents

Photographs are the literalization of the Lacanian split subject. Here, we are forced to experience “the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (Barthes *Camera Lucida* 12). By looking at the photograph, we become like Lacan’s infant in the mirror stage. We identify through the sensation of becoming an object, of experiencing ourselves through “dissociation.” What happens in front of the camera is a panoptic impulse for we change our bodies into a conventional, normalized form: “I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform in advance into an image” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 10). Read without attention to detail, Barthes’ observation could suggest that photography is responsible for the lack of authenticity in identity presentation, a problem exacerbated by a Facebook user’s shameless selfie. However, panopticism reveals that posing is a product of surveillance society.

The gaze also causes inauthenticity in the space of the journal, a genre traditionally imbued with authenticity. Journals and diaries are private accounts of the self; their construction is kept away from public eyes and consumption. Barthes problematizes the notion of the Journal

as authentic in his essay “Deliberation.” Barthes offers that “the Other, caught up in a dual and somehow personal relation is *anyone who will read me*. In short, I imagine that my Journal pages are put in front of ‘whom I am looking at,’” suggesting that the potentiality of an audience corrupts any potential for a piece of writing that is sincere and not posed (491). Barthes indicates that “I am disgusted and irritated to find a ‘pose’ I certainly hadn’t intended” (479).

This “irritation” with the pose demonstrates the internalization of surveillance. Even in the privacy of the journal, we find that authenticity is impossible. Facebook’s journalistic format allows us to align the traditional private journal with the social media confessional. The pose on social media is whatever the user chooses to present—as long as that identity can conform to certain social pressures. The edited nature of the Facebook self is the effect of internalized surveillance. The ‘pose’ Barthes speaks of is the effect of the internalized panoptic gaze that operates with near invisibility in society, only to be revealed by those interrogating the structures of power and society. When Barthes poses in his journal, he performs a citation of identity. Of this occurrence, Mary Bittner Wiseman offers “there is no original: desire lived and written alike are simulacra of the already written” (*The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes* 121). The Journal and the Photograph become inauthentic markers of identity because both are inauthentic, simulated. Users of Facebook also perform a citation of identity, relying on past conventions and tropes to present themselves to the public gaze.

Barthes further explores the nature of the pose in the Journal:

I mean that its very form can only be borrowed from an antecedent... Writing in my Journal, I am, by status, doomed to simulation. A double simulation, in fact: for every emotion being a copy of the same emotion one has read somewhere.

(493)

The idea of language “borrowed from an antecedent” aligns with Derrida’s concept of iterability. In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida explains indicates that both speech and writing are performative acts and are all iterable, citable, and repeatable. Derrida’s idea of iterability reinforces Barthes’ sentiments on authenticity in “Deliberation.” Our way of understanding and being part of the world is through language, and language is always already not ours, a construct that forces us to become alienated from our identities. This occurrence is embedded in the very idea of the Lacanian subject. Language mediates the subject and the idea of the self and this occurs online, as well as in physical life.

When reduced to its most base form, social media is just another system of representation, one not wholly different than language itself. The mediation of reality often occurs through language, calling into question the nature of human interactions as an artificial construct. In *What is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe offers that “the human is itself a prosthetic being, who from day one is constituted *as* human by its coevolution with and conconstitution by external archival technologies of various technologies of various kinds—including language itself as the first archive and prosthesis” (295). With Wolfe’s Derridean supposition, it becomes clear that communication is a construct humanity naively believes is completely natural. A degree of artificiality attends to all forms of communication, not just social media. Digital and physical communications are yoked together through the prosthesis of language and through the commonality of construction. In recognizing the constructed nature of language, even spoken language, we recognize the constructed nature of both digital or physical society and identity.

Structuring and Reclassifying: Machine Identity

In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle claims that the computer itself no longer has a “clear intellectual identity as a calculating machine” (18). If over the last twenty years the identity of

the computer-medium is fluctuating, is it really any wonder that the concept of human identity is in a similar process of revision, refusing to stabilize? Turkle argues that digital communities “allow people to generate experiences, relationships, identities, and living spaces”—social media has internalized the logic of older virtual communities and created a cultural phenomenon of a relentless need to certify the offline self through online activity (21). Turkle’s pioneering work on identity and the Internet can be used in conjunction with Barthes’ and Sontag’s theoretical meditations on the role of the camera.

Reality is always already an interpretive experience, one mediated largely by the seeming invisible aspects of sociohistorical circumstances and largely through language. To pretend that reality is not mediated is to subscribe to a fiction, a nostalgic myth. However, it appears that social media sites like Facebook enjoy and exacerbate that mediation. Perhaps, it is best stated that the physical/traditional way on interpreting reality relies on the mediation of oral language whereas reality is interpreted online through the mediation of images. The nature of social networking excels and propels this peculiar form of mediation.

As a practice, social networking revels in mediation, calling attention to immediate nostalgia. According to Fredric Jameson in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” the immediate nostalgia produced by Facebook is actually a symptom of postmodernism. Jameson indicates that society has lost “its capacity to retain its own past, [and] has begun to live in a perpetual present” that functions through “media exhaustion” (11). In “You Can Tell Everybody This is Your Song,” Carrie Brownstein indicates that social media sites like Facebook have created a funeral for the present: “I think Facebook should advertise itself as a memorial service for the living. It makes the present feel as if it is instantaneously collecting dust” (2).

Brownstein's present that collects dust mirrors Jameson's media exhaustion of the perpetual present.

We can see evidence of this perpetual present on Facebook through the function of the newsfeed. Turkle claims that "[o]ne way to describe what has happened is to say that we are moving from a modernist culture of calculation toward a postmodernist culture of simulation" (20). This simulation involves the onscreen experience in which texts and images are constructed and interpreted by the user because Facebook appears as a manifestation of personhood, of personal identity, and relationships. Here once again, we find that the subject is produced through outside observation. The photographs on Facebook reinforce simulated experience.

Turkle diagnoses this process of simulation, claiming contemporary society is "moving toward a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real" (23). However accurate this claim feels, Turkle's analysis is incomplete: this idea of substitution applies less to the Millennials and their children than it does previous generations. In digital native society, there seems little need or desire to mitigate the realness of the life online. Moreover, for digital natives, the presence of the camera is natural, ordinary, and expected. In fact, online life is equally important as physical life. To classify physical life as "real" life assumes there is an unreal quality of a digital presence. For digital natives, this diminishment of the virtual feels largely untrue. To call the idea of living online as well as in the actual "simulation" still implies falseness, a copy, a shadow; yet, there is no other word to use for the process of dwelling simultaneously in the digital and actual worlds. I unwillingly use the term simulation, acknowledging the word cannot perform that task it needs to, knowing the proper word has not yet arrived.

For digital natives on Facebook, the authorial camera is hyperpresent. The camera is positioned as authorial for a couple of reasons. Firstly, when photographs are disseminated and shared, they appear to grant authority to an event because they are reproductions of reality. Secondly, the images produced by the camera act as the narrative “I” of identity, determining what the viewer (formally reader) sees and knows. Arguably, notions of Facebook reality as a counterfeit reality seem to wane for digital natives because they have internalized the notion of surveillance as posited by D.A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police*. Miller provides some of the theoretical framework for identity in Facebook. The camera (through the pictures it produces) acts as the authorial voice, the true narrator of a (self)policed experience. The pictures authenticate the characterized version of the self on Facebook. Miller posits, “omniscient narration assumes a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance. Nothing worth knowing escapes its notation, and its complete knowledge includes the knowledge that is always right” (23). If he is correct, then a Facebook user internalizes the omniscient narrator’s “complete knowledge” through the consumption of the photograph.

Because the camera-narrator is normalized into the societal experience presented *through* the filter of a camera, and then *through* the filter of a social media site, it fails to seem strange, fails to shock. The naturalization of cameras in mundane life is what helps keep a site like Facebook from seeming intrusive. When the digital camera leapt from the stand-alone device to part of cell or smartphone, the total normalization of this authorial gaze, this certifying stamp, took hold.

The case could be made that these authorial photographs function, replicate, and reproduce the way an individual would recount an event to a group of friends. Yet, any social situation involves the suppression of “undesirable traits.” After all, it is hardly polite

conversation or beneficial to the individual to casually and candidly enumerate such shortcomings in normal, physical conversation. The physical identity is just as constructed as the alleged narcissistic digital identity on social media. Admitting that the physical self is just a construction unsettles the fictive myth of physical supremacy. In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida indicates “one writes...to communicate to those who are absent” and it is absence that has traditionally associated writing with death (5). Speech is associated with the generative power of presence and of life, which is why speech is awarded primacy. The myth of physical supremacy is nothing more than the restaging of an ancient debate, traceable to Plato’s *Phaedrus*: the binary of the physical/digital is actually a generational descendent of the binary of speech/writing. The process of writing still stands, in the same subjugated position as the digital. Social media is threatening because it allows for an absent kind of communication, a spectral communication.

Yet, construction of the physical or digital construction of the self is always a construction imposed by society. Rather than relegating social media as a tool of narcissism, it is important to contemplate the ways online identity is generative and imagined through the power constructs of online communities. The photograph is a stand-in for the verbal story. The picture, in short, produces a reality not dissimilar to the one produced in conversation. Truly, the difference in the conversation lies only in the medium, not in conversational content.

Digital Communities

In *CyberReader*, Victor Vitanza indicates cyberspace “was coined and popularized by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer*. For Gibson, it means ‘consensual hallucination’” (Vitanza 1). Gibson’s explanation of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* parallels Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities. Gibson explains cyberspace, or more broadly, the Internet, is a

“consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity.” (67). If digital communities, like Facebook, operate in cyberspace then their users partake in the consensual hallucination. Facebook and other digital communities thusly represent postmodern reconfigurations of the imagined community of the nation state.

Physical and digital communities share a great deal in common. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson explains the theoretical framework that creates the idea of the nation. He offers a nation “is an imagined political community” (6). He indicates the nation “is *imagined* because most of the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The fact that the majority of nation members “will never know most of their fellow-members” in physical life does not trivialize the bond. This same imagining—this *consensual hallucination*—is typically rendered as shallow despite the fact that “virtual communities ranging from MUDs to computer bulletin boards allow people to generate experiences, relationships, identities and living spaces that arise only through an interaction with technology” (Turkle 21). Both national communities and digital communities function on the principles proposed by Anderson. The only difference is one interaction occurs on the physical plane, while the other on a digital. The digitally imagined community, perhaps, is more direct in acknowledging the constructed nature of a community. Domingo Sanchez-Mesa Martinez explains the fluidity between Gibson’s consensual hallucination and Anderson’s imagined community in his article “Dialogical Thinking in the Digital Era: Paradoxes of Cyberculture.” Martinez offers the following about online communities

and Anderson: “what really distinguishes certain communities from others is the way identification links work in the minds of people, the way they imagine the community to which they belong” (110). Martinez establishes a link between Anderson and Gibson in such a way that demonstrates the capacity to rescue social media communications from becoming as meaningless and self-absorbed as Twenge and others suggest.

At times, scholars conflate the terms “virtual reality” and “cyberspace.” Each term has its own nuance: Vitanza suggests that the “easy difference between cyberspace and virtual reality is that in VR [virtual reality], we can *actually believe* we are *in it*” (italics in original, 2). Throughout this work, I have carefully avoided the word “virtual reality”; the term virtual operates under a binary construct that always favors physical reality, a construct that positions the virtual as a “sham” (Vitanza 3). Instead, I find that digital reality is a far more appropriate signifier for the space of Facebook. On Facebook, users are *actually in* digital reality—to digital natives, it is no less real than physical reality. Digital reality then becomes the space in which Facebook functions because of the etymological roots of the term “digital”. Wolfe acknowledges the very term “digital” allows a degree of permeability between the online and the physical world. Wolfe indicates that digital “refers to electronically mediated mass culture based on binary coding...[and] harkens back etymologically to the digits, the *fingers*” (italics in original 202). This etymological link between the online world and the physical world is central to acknowledging “we have not reality but realities” (Vitanza 3). These “realities” are accessed through language. The visual subject of Facebook experiences the social network from a state of multiplicity.

The Mirror Gaze

For the digital natives, the myth of Narcissus is quite relevant. However, Narcissus’ relevancy is not for vanity and self-absorption, but for what Narcissus can teach us about visual

subjectivity and Lacan's space of the screen. Phil Lee suggests, in his "Annotation to 'The Split Between the Eye and the Gaze,'" that the

gaze alienates subjects from themselves by causing the subject to identify with itself as the *objet a*, the object of the drives...in constructing the human subject...the gaze denies the subject its full subjectivity. The subject is reduced to an object of desire and, in identifying with this object, it becomes alienated from itself. (1)

Like Narcissus, Facebook users identify with a reflection, only they are identifying through a photographic image. This identification is Lacan's split subject, for the user's gaze (much like Narcissus' gaze) causes the subject to become an object. We can find traces of the photographic self as Other and object in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. The Lacanian space of the screen also parallels with Stone's notion of warranting, because the self becomes "legible" through the alienated self-gaze and society's panopticism. Lee also suggests that "Lacan's scopic field as imagery space is one of the primary resources to investigate how our subjectivity is mediated by the images appearing on screens" (1). This mediation of subjectivity through photographs is what we will explore in the next few chapters because the imagined community of Facebook operates on these theories of vision in order to construct an identity.

CHAPTER 2 NARCISSUS AT THE POOL: MYTHS OF VISIBILITY

“What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is
outside”

—Jacques Lacan, “What is a Picture?”

Narcissus Rising

Twenge and Campbell claim in *The Narcissus Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* that social media sites like Facebook force us to repeat “the tragedy of the mythical Greek Narcissus: we are hopelessly absorbed with ourselves” (105). For Twenge and Campbell, photographs play an essential role: social networking sites “reward the skills of the narcissist, such as self-promotion [by] selecting flattering photographs of oneself” (110). While this observation is accurate because Facebook allows for a selective presentation of the self, Twenge and Campbell are indulging a myth of identity—that there was some golden age of identity where people authentically presented every aspect of their selves for the public gaze and public consumption. However, as demonstrated previously by Barthes’ “Deliberation” essay, an authentic presentation of identity is not possible. Moreover, because contemporary society has internalized surveillance, (self)policed presentation is a common occurrence.

Twenge and Campbell claim the “name ‘Facebook’ is just right, with its nuance of seeing and being seen, preferably looking as attractive as possible” (107). While I disagree that Facebook is responsible for inducing cultural narcissism amongst Millennials, I acknowledge that Facebook does call attraction to the constitution of the visual subject through the “nuance of seeing and being seen” (107). Twenge and Campbell have that aspect of Facebook correct,

though rather than attributing this nuance to its panoptic root, they displace and demonize the nuance as a narcissistic trait.

A society of internalized surveillance troubles the idea of privacy and authenticity due to the idea of the gaze. Barthes noted that photography's cultural emergence was synonymous with the "creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private" (*Camera Lucida* 98). Facebook uses the "publicity of the private" as an inherent operating principal. Photographic identity on Facebook originates from physical experience, though this form of identity does not reach maturation until its mediation online, in the public gaze.

We keep returning to the desire for visibility, for the "nuance of seeing and being seen" (Twenge and Campbell 107). Since the proliferation and popularization of Facebook, the rhetoric surrounding relationships reflects the position of authority Facebook occupies amongst the digital native population. Many digital natives say, "you're not friends or in a relationship until it's Facebook official." According to Twenge and Campbell, this desire for publicity is the result of narcissism. However, we can better understand the desire to present the relationship in public as a panoptic impulse, one that positions the construction of the self as irrevocably intertwined with visibility.

In order to best understand the relationship between Facebook photographs and visual subjectivity, we can turn to Dave Egger's novel *The Circle*. Though technologically pessimistic in nature, the novel is essential in our interrogation of Facebook identity. *The Circle* suggests a cultural interest and concern with the ramifications of digital native culture. Despite the presence of technological pessimism, the text is useful in illuminating the role visibility plays in the formation of social media identity.

The Circle: To Be is To Be Seen?

In *The Circle*, Dave Eggers critiques social media culture by allegedly revealing the shallow nature of digital identity and digital communications. The story follows Mae Holland's rise to power in the fictitious Facebook/Google-like social media company, The Circle. To eliminate confusion between the novel's title and the fictitious company, the novel will be referred to as *The Circle* while the social media site will be referred to as The Circle. Employees of The Circle are known simply as Circlers, and are caricatures of Millennials worthy of a critic like Twenge.

Eggers posits that the physical world always supersedes the digital world. This hierarchy, coupled with the trajectory of the novel, exposes Eggers' subscription to technological determinism. Moreover, the novel is a panoptic attempt to police the behavior of the Millennials. By using the theoretical implications of Miller's *The Novel and the Police*, I position the novel as a form of literary discipline because *The Circle* enforces normative practices of social communication predicated by the supremacy of the physical world. Online identity, according to the logic of *The Circle*, is validated externally by the pleasure divined from constantly being observed. This supposition guides the formation of identity on Facebook as well.

The presence of the camera in the novel mimics the naturalization of the camera in the real world. On actual social media sites like Facebook, pictures assist in the creation of digital identity. Furthermore, in "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'," Vivian Sobchack indicates the "technological innovations" of realism brought "unprecedented *visibility*" particularly in the form of the photograph (90). In *The Circle*, visibility poses a central issue for the formation of identity, one tied to the presence of photographs with the social network.

This reliance on camera-confirmed visibility begins early in the novel. Fellow Circler Josiah admonishes Mae's lack of photographic documentation, calling such behavior "selfish" (Eggers 187). He says, "I'm doing a search now of your name for visual documentation of any of these trips you've taken. I'm not finding anything... think if you'd been *documenting*. If you'd been using a tool that would help confirm the identity of whatever birds you saw, then anyone can benefit" (italics in original 186-7). At this point in the novel, Mae had failed to document her excursion; it was as if her experience did not exist because it lacked digital visibility.

If Mae had documented her experience and posted it onto The Circle's social network, her experience would have existed past the confines of mere memory. The camera that helped "confirm the identity" of the wildlife would simultaneously validate Mae's experience as an individual. By taking photographs and sharing them on The Circle, Mae becomes a visual subject, recognizable by her visually documented activities. Without "visual documentation", Mae's selfhood is at stake (Eggers 187).

Eggers suggests that for digital natives, and for digital natives alone, to be seen is to exist. However, the nuance of being seen and seeing is older, locatable not only in Foucault, but also in the theories of eighteenth century philosopher George Berkeley. Essentially, Berkeley's theory of immaterialism liberates the users of social media from a shallow desire of observation. Berkeley posits that for a subject to exist, the subject must be externally perceived. Sylvie Henning explains in "Film: A Dialogue Between Beckett and Berkeley" that only through the "act of being perceived" can a subject be "invested with sensible qualities, thereby coming into existence" (2). This further displaces the need for external validation to the 1700s, long before the rise of the digital age.

What is unique about digital native culture is that this kind of visibility is spectral—meaning that the subject does not have to be physically observed in real time. Instead the subject is split, objectified by its’ photographic reflection and placed online for a digital audience. Once again, we can turn to Derrida and understand that the operating principles of a social media site like The Circle or Facebook are an absent form of communication, one related to writing. Social media differs from novels and poetry of past centuries because it democratizes the ability to make identity “iterable in our absence”(Derrida qtd in Wolfe 294). Moreover, this potential for iterability “is always already in play with *any* form of representation, any semiosis whether of word or image” (italics in original Wolfe 295). When we recognize the need for external observation is not new, we realize social media identity and experience are not vastly different from physical identity and experience.

While Eggers does seem to suggest that only digital natives crave visibility, his observations concerning this existential crisis are worth noting. Eggers confronts the nature of the visual subject towards the end of the novel. By the end of the novel, Mae constantly streams a live video feed and consistently uploads pictures to the other members of the Circle. She has achieved transparency, the highest form of visibility. Mae interacts with Kalden, one of the inventors of the Circle, who believes the social network has too much societal information:

[Mae]--I think everything and *everyone* should be seen. And to be seen, we need to be watched. The two go hand and hand.

[Kalden]--But who wants to be watched all the time?

[Mae]--I do. I *want* to be seen. I want proof I existed. (italics in original Eggers 485)

When Mae says, “I think everything and *everyone* should be seen. And to be seen, we need to be watched. The two go hand and hand,” she acknowledges that the visual subject is the result of panopticism (485). We can stretch this statement further to its most theoretical point: as a construction of panopticism, the visual subject becomes a split subject, an object consumed by the public gaze. In a society of surveillance, this is the way people are given meaning: visibility. One way to certify this visibility is through pictures on social networking sites.

Once again, readers are reminded that the goal of social media is to certify existence. The sensation of being seen and observed is the only way to come into existence. Such certification is what creates identity online. What Mae suggests is that without being “seen” she has no proof she existed at all. This reinforces Berkeley’s formulation of identity. Mae does not want to be forgotten, to fade away, to remain unseen, to not exist. Social media offers its users a certifying presence, an archival effect, a slice of immortality.

We now return to Lacan’s split subject. When the split subject is forced to recognize itself from an exterior vantage point, the self becomes an object, Other. On social media sites like *The Circle* or Facebook, the object-self becomes validated in the process of commodification. In *The Circle*, commodification occurs through the amount of zings, smiles, followers, and comments on a user’s profile. These digital interactions are the currency of visibility, proof of existence. On Facebook, commodification occurs through likes, comments, and shares. All of these online interactions are recognition of being seen. We explore the currency of visibility and self-commodification more fully in the last chapter, but for now we turn our attention to the Facebook experience and the photographs that populate the social network.

CHAPTER 3 TAGGED!: ON CAMERA MOBILITY, MEMORY AND FACEBOOK PHOTOGRAPHS

“Photography is an element of a new and homogenous terrain of consumption and circulation in which an observer becomes lodged”

—Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*

“Self-definition can be a determined appeal for recognition”

—Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*

Camera Mobility

The advent of the extreme accessibility of the camera, located today not only as a stand-alone device, but also included in digital tablets, phones, and computers, allows nearly all members of society to function as what Barthes terms Operator (the photographer), Spectator (the voyeur and consumer of photographs), and Spectrum (the subject/object of the photograph) in *Camera Lucida*. As mentioned, the constant availability of the camera nurtured an entire generation of amateur and professional photographers armed with pocket cameras, waiting to preserve reality with the click of a button. Barthes’ terms are our departure point for discussing photographs on Facebook, though these terms expand when applied to Facebook because Facebook users often occupy all of Barthes’ terms at the same time. Due to this simultaneous embodiment of the Operator, Spectator, and Spectrum, I will herein refer to this phenomenon as the Photographic Triad. Even in the Photographic Triad, we can trace the presence of panopticism. The gaze of the camera creates a situation that reveals to the Spectrum the nature of surveillance, which forces the “pose” that Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida* and

“Deliberation.” When we pose for a camera, we “transform” ourselves into “an image in advance” (*Camera Lucida* 10); this transformation is a panoptic impulse because when we pose, we alter our presentation to fit within the appropriate societal bandwidth.

One of the ways we can explore the nature of photographic identity on Facebook emerges in two iPhone 5 television commercials from 2013. We will attend to both commercials separately. The first commercial, released directly from Apple, contains only one line of dialogue through the entire minute long commercial: “Every day, more and more photos are taken with the iPhone than any other camera” (Apple iPhone 5, Apple). The commercial features no celebrity cameos, no images or scenes of the social elite. Instead, the mundane world and the average person are elevated, capturing elements of what Susan Sontag would classify as “souvenirs of daily life” (*On Photography* 6). The people in the commercial take photographs of scenery and each other, cataloging the minutia of living. The elevation of the “souvenirs of daily life” also reveals the internalization of surveillance. The focus of an ordinary person as photographer also demonstrates the cultural message of the advertisement: every experience and vantage point is not only valid, but relevant in social networks.

We must pause on the cultural message that every vantage point is relevant. This speaks not only to an American understanding of the importance of the individual, but is also underscores the culture of pluralist capitalism—a cultural understanding that directly impacts the formation of a user’s identity on social media sites like Facebook. In *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, Michael Novak indicates “[p]ersonhood entails the right—the *vocation*—to be different” (italics in original 64). This preset of pluralist capitalism is of particular interest to our discussion regarding photographic Facebook identity construction because the “vocation to be different” is also related to the commodification of identity. Personhood in this context becomes

a commodity because the photographs, like the ones taken in the iPhone commercial, are traded and exchanged on Facebook every day. The exchange of photographs allows for an exchange of varying perspectives, each image dutifully consumed by the Facebook user.

The role of the everyman photographer in the commercial is important for another reason: the everyman photographer enacts the amorphous, postmodern space between amateur and professional. This blurred space between professional and amateur photographer is also symptomatic of postmodernity. Jameson indicates that one of the effects of postmodernism “is the effacement...of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (1). Smartphone technology facilitates the rise of the amateur photographer through the use of filters included in the camera feature of the smart phone. The iPhone 5 is not alone in this endeavor; Instagram, a mobile photo sharing app now owned by Facebook, features built in filters that boost the quality and appearance of a normal photograph. Facebook’s own photo uploader features similar camera filters. The filters recall Jameson’s perpetual present and Brownstein’s dust collecting future. By utilizing either the Instagram or Facebook filters, users may feel compelled to alter the original photograph with nostalgic colors.

As the focal point of the advertisement, the iPhone 5’s camera is placed in a variety of settings throughout the minute-long advertisement. Because the camera is featured in numerous geographic locations in the commercial, the presence of the camera within society is normalized—as is the action of the Operator. The advertisement features a variety of Operators that either slow down their pace or stop moving entirely to capture an image. The man presented between the 12th and 15th second mark best exhibits this. The man crouches slightly in a drenched street to photograph a weathered red building. After snapping the perfect,

immortalizing photograph, the man straightens and jogs away. Perhaps he is an excited tourist, a twenty-first century flaneur, departing for the next moment to collect and consume. The ad is unclear. In the end, it does not matter what prompts the man to slow, crouch, and depart quickly; what does matter is the fact that his behavior resonates with the Millennial audience, who has, more than likely, performed the same action or witnessed a similar occurrence. It is the photograph, after all, that will stand in as representation for the experience on Facebook. While there will be some textual certification in the form of a photo album name or a caption in the form of an explanatory sentence, it is the photographs that are collected that will narrate the event and the memory of the experience on social media.

The second commercial produced by Sprint espouses the goal of photographic narration within the context of current culture. We can use the Sprint commercial to explore how the emerging digital natives operate as the Photographic Triad. The commercial states:

The miraculous is everywhere. In our homes. In our minds. We can share every second of data dressed as pixels. A billion roaming photojournalists uploading the human experience and it is spectacular. So why would you cap that? My iPhone 5 lets me see every point of view, every panorama: the entire gallery of humanity. I need to upload all of me. I need, no, I have the right to be unlimited. (Sprint)

In essence, the narrator of the commercial is the digital everyman, the one espousing the values of visual subjectivity. Here, we can glance at the implications of a society that has internalized surveillance. When viewed microcosmically, the word “unlimited” refers to the size of the data plan. However, more macrocosmically, “unlimited” has potent implications for the visual subject of contemporary culture.

The speaker of the Sprint commercial elevates the plight of the ordinary life to the status of the “miraculous.” The advertisement positions the iPhone 5 as authorial for it possesses the capacity to “see every point of view.” Here, the camera becomes the tool by which the “entire gallery of humanity” is unveiled. The desire to present and observe the “entire gallery of humanity” is also a panoptic impulse, one that resonates with the logic Josiah promoted in *The Circle* when he suggested Mae should document all of her experiences.

It is also important that the use of the word “gallery” is present in the Sprint commercial, for it suggests and recalls a visual experience. The Sprint advertisement (much like *The Circle*) suggests that the “gallery of humanity” is observable through the photographs uploaded onto social networks. Through the “billion roaming photojournalists,” human experience and identity can be poetically “dressed as pixels.” The desire to dress human identity in pixels is a trope of sci-fi stories. While this rhetoric is certainly interesting, my end goal for this particular analysis does not allow for such musings.

The phrase “roaming photojournalists” also denotes the postmodern erosion of amateur and professional photographers. The collapse of these categories also means that these “billion roaming photojournalists” can causally “uploa[d] the human experience” in the form of a photograph. And it is these “photojournalists” that reinforce the idea that the authorial camera lets “nothing worth notation...escap[e] its gaze” (Miller 23).

While the entire commercial is provocative, the second to last line is the most gripping: “I need to upload all of me.” The simplest response to this statement is to ask why there is a “need” and not a “want.” The commercial demonstrates the digital native belief that the essence of humanity is a thing that can, and *needs* to be transported to the digital realm. This desire for

transference to the social network is the result of panopticism, the desire for visibility for, as we have begun to discover, visibility is vital in the constitution of the subject.

The Mythology of the Self

The nature of the digital space of Facebook allows for users to construct a personal, visually narrated mythology. Facebook's very name implicates its capacity and potential for narrative construction. It may seem problematic to claim that Facebook identity is equally valid as a physical presentation of identity; however, we have already discussed the ways in which an "authentic" identity is not realistic or possible. Both Facebook and physical identities rely on personal fictions to position the self as cohesive. The stabilizing effect of narrative is what holds the recognition of the Lacanian split subject at bay. It is this narrative effect that I want to explore.

The reproduction of reality inherent in photographs is the latest narrative tool employed to construct the myth of a cohesive identity. The narrative capacity of photographs intensifies when they are included as an autobiographical device on Facebook. Wiseman reminds us that autobiographies are "constructed, not natural. The autobiography is not a self-written life, but a rewritten self; for insofar as the self is constructed along lines drawn by the structural model of language, it may be said to be written" (Wiseman 112). Furthermore, Barthes suggests that photography "began, historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's *formality*" (italics in original *Camera Lucida* 27). Barthes acknowledges photography's art form: identity construction. The photographic identity construction is a narrative, a story of a person.

Because Facebook functions similar to an autobiography, I intend to explain how photographic narratives function. The desire to create and recreate narratives to communicate

experience is what I term the Calliope Impulse. Derived from the Greek muse of epic poetry, the Calliope Impulse is associated with the act of creation and the act of deposing older narratives so new stories may rise. The Calliope Impulse not only governs the physical world, but is also easily visible regarding photographic narrative structures present on Facebook.

For Barthes, the analog photograph contained the “illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*” (italics in original “Rhetoric of the Image” 278). Once a photograph is uploaded to Facebook, the photograph experiences an additional postmodern temporality that I call the *here-always*, which is akin to Jameson’s notion of the “perpetual present” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 11). This strange temporality affects the way in which the photographic Facebook narrative functions. Facebook users actively craft autobiographical accounts of their lives, cataloging experiences, snapping photographs. In essence, the Facebook status update box encourages users to offer “souvenirs of daily life” (Sontag 6). Facebook demands its users immortalize the mundane and the extraordinary for a (relatively) public audience.

Profile and Cover photographs are two ways in which an individual user begins to use the Calliope Impulse to present an identity. The profile picture is similarly situated to the verbal language of self-description, a concept thoroughly explored in Denise Riley’s *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*. According to Riley, linguistic self-descriptors “may well be my self-fantasy. Perhaps each and every act of identification is fantastical...for fantasy is sustained through metaphorocity” (13). Riley suggests that self-descriptions are a way to narrate a projection of the self’s interiority. When applied to the photographic language of Facebook, the profile picture becomes an act of “self-fantasy” as well; the profile picture is a visual self-description, the first introduction to the Facebook self. The profile picture is also an act of

metaphor because it is the double, the Lacanian object-self of the physical user. When members of Facebook look at another user's profile picture, they are met with a photographic equivalent of a linguistic self-descriptor, a public representation of interiority equally as revelatory as revealing that one is "artsy" or "adventurous" The profile picture functions as "me as my enthusiasms" (Riley 23). Consequently, such enthusiasms are the guiding force of the banner-like Cover photograph. In a way, the Cover photograph functions as a contemporary coat of arms, offering an additional means of self-description meant to display a user's personality for digital consumption.

Another way Facebook users engage the Calliope Impulse is through the increasingly blurred distinction between physical life events and digital ones. Recently, a new feature was introduced to Facebook's design: the ability to designate milestone moments in the form of an "Add a Life Event" feature. These Life Events are photographically represented on Timeline. Now, a Facebook user has the narrative authority to mark various life events in a medium that feels like a publication.

In the 2013 incarnation of Facebook's status update box, users are prompted to share three options: Status, Photo, and Check In. These three options actively construct the identities of users and suggest the increasing legitimacy of the intangible frontier of the social network and the photographs that comprise the medium. In most basic terms, the Status option functions as a caption. When a user posts a status update, the text is placed next to the user's profile picture. This configuration is visible not only on the user's profile, but also in the streaming newsfeed.

The "Check-in" option is the most suggestive. Though this feature was designed with Foursquare in mind, the ability to "check in" online demonstrated the panoptic nature of the social media user. By self-reporting the physical location to Facebook, we can begin to

understand how photographs are an extension of internalized surveillance and how this surveillance produces an identity.

Facebook Photographs as a System of Representation

At this moment in our discussion, I find it necessary to explain how photographs function as a part of a myth system on Facebook. In “Myth Today,” Roland Barthes indicates that

[p]ictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful... We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article. (3)

What we can extrapolate from this supposition is that once a sign is charged with meaning, it becomes a form of speech. Facebook photographs are charged with the power of self-description. In this way, Facebook photographs help “conver[t] reality into speech,” and into a system of representation that we can begin to decode and understand (Barthes 2).

In Chapter 1, I suggested that photographs visually depict the Lacanian split subject. The fracturing of the subject between self and other is a by-product of language. When applied to the photographic system of Facebook, the split subject also struggles to present and maintain the appearance of cohesive integrity. The desire for cohesion is part of a larger cultural mythic system. Facebook users utilize photographs to present aspects of the self for public consumption. We previously noted that the profile and cover photograph can be understood as an image of self-description. When used in this way, the language of Facebook photographs becomes a narrative tool to express the self to the world. The expression of interior reality is problematic though. In *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters offers

Language and signs are crude carriers for the inner life. Words at best are conventions; they refer to meanings inside people's minds and to objects in the world. When we express ourselves, we trust private self-stuff to public symbol proxies. (64)

Spoken, written, and photographic language all furnish an individual with "public symbol proxies" that are meant to convey our unique experience. But, as Peters suggests, all of these systems of representations are "crude carriers" and "conventions" (64). Once again, we are reminded authenticity is impossible: our language and posing interrupts our best attempts to resolve not only the split subject of self and other, but self and society. The impossible task of all communication, whether spoken or written, is the "reconcil[iation] of self and other" (Peters 9).

On Facebook, this task is trivialized because photographs are the language of self-description, but by remembering Derrida's observations on iterability, we can rescue Facebook communication from triviality and narcissism. By recognizing that "[a]ll communication, whether face-to-face or distant" is "a problem of mediation," we are made conscious of the way that language structures our experiences (Peters 64). Like Lacan suggests, language forces the subject to become other, to become an object. Yet, as we construct our identities on Facebook or in the physical world, language also creates an illusion of cohesion. One of the ways Facebook users engage the Calliope Impulse is by constructing a narrative of the self that to the observer appears stable. On Facebook, the photographic language of self-description aids a user in presenting a stable, *fictional* identity. For example, if I identify myself as an equestrian, I will likely reflect that passion on Facebook through my photographs and statuses. In the physical world, I would present this identity through recounting horse stories to my friends, or by wearing my breeches and boots unabashedly to dinner. On Facebook, I may post a picture of my horse in

the pasture; I might post a picture of myself on my horse sailing effortlessly over a jump. My photographic language asserts my posture as a strong, dedicated rider. However, these photographic self-descriptors of “The Equestrian” do not account or reveal my fragmentary experiences as an individual. My Facebook and physical identity may reflect a horse enthusiast, but this identity is carefully cultivated through what I choose to reveal and conceal through language. My language, photographic or oral, reveals my fictionalized perspective of my selfhood.

It is at this moment that we must return to Barthes’ observation of photography as “the art of a Person” (*Camera Lucida* 12). Barthes suggests an individual’s identity *is* chiefly a construction, artificially dressed and narratively developed. Perhaps what makes many technological pessimists most uncomfortable about the digital natives’ use of Facebook is the way in which the scaffolding of identity is rendered visible through language.

Facebook Photographs and Tourism

I want to challenge Sontag’s claim that “the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually in one’s own” (*On Photography* 57). Sontag claims that photography “has become one of the principle devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation” (10). Facebook’s Timeline feature certainly carries aspects of such photographic tourism; however, just because users are navigating other user’s photographs does not mean that users are merely giving an “appearance of participation.”

On Facebook, shared photographs allow for active participation in the (re)creation of memory. Because the Internet exists in the illogical postmodern temporality of the perpetual present of the *here-always*, there is an inevitable expansion of the term participation. When users

log onto Facebook, they are immediately brought to the live-stream of the newsfeed². Often, photographs populate the newsfeed. When users click on another individual's profile, they can tour various photographs and years. This ability to meander through the online events does not directly translate into a touristic non-participation as Sontag would suggest. A user's capacity to encounter and re-encounter photographs is a digital form of participation because every view, like, and comment shapes not only the photograph, but also the experience of the user.

Depending in the privacy setting of a user, photographs uploaded on Facebook belong to all the user's friends on social network and not just the individual uploading the photograph. This shared experience and memory of the digital photograph becomes a postmodern form of public memory. As Annette Kuhn indicates in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory, Acts of Imagination*, "memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image" (14). With regards to Facebook, the ability for multiple users to view and engage any given photograph demonstrates how memory is generated in a network. The photograph's capacity to generate a memory demonstrates the Calliope Impulse. Users seek to colonize the photograph, assign meaning to the image. It is this process of colonization that illuminates how experience and participation function on Facebook.

Facebook offers its users a variety of ways to upload and present photographs to the social network. A person may either create an album or upload directly to Timeline. Either

² According to Facebook, the Top News feature is "based on an algorithm" and "uses factors such as how many friends re commenting on a post to aggregate content you'll find interesting" (*Facebook Tips*). Additionally, Facebook introduced Sponsored Stories that are paid advertisements that appear on the Top Newsfeed (*Facebook Help*).

option adds the photograph to the profile. The Facebook photo album has antecedents in an older Calliope Impulse: the family photo album of the twentieth century.

In order to discuss the family photo album, we must turn to Sontag. According to Sontag, coffee table photo albums of the twentieth century presented a “portrait chronicle...a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” of a family’s identity (Sontag, *On Photography* 8). Here, Sontag admits that “cameras go with family life” in order to construct mythologies of people (8). Bound up in the family photo album is the presentation of a constructed, cohesive, and stable familial identity. In other words, a family photo album creates a singular narrative or myth of the family, one that feels complete and truthful due to the photograph’s capacity to faithfully reproduce reality. Photographs authenticate an illusion of continuity, particularly when photographs are fastened chronologically in a family photo album. The selection and editing process of the family photo album operates under the same parameters as the selection and editing of narrative, on Facebook or elsewhere. By taking selected scenes, the photographic construction of the family photo album engages the Calliope Impulse in order to present a mythical cohesive familial identity.

If these earlier family photo albums were a “portable kit of images” aimed at creating a familial identity, then the Facebook photographs are the digital descendants of this older practice. After all, both the photo album and Facebook photographs operate under similar parameters of narrative identity construction. Facebook users also gather, select, and upload images in order to present a cohesive identity for the individual user. The abundance of images accessible on social media websites create a shift in identity construction that is ultimately grounded in Sontag’s notion of a “portable kit of images.” No longer are people limited to constructing ideas of individuality via portraits in a mundane photo album. In contemporary

digital culture, the sheer quantity of photographs aid in the creation of a visually represented self, or doppelganger, that may or may not contrast to the physical self.

However, the experience of paging through a Twentieth century photo album is not perfectly replicated on Facebook. Firstly, unlike the family photo album, Facebook photo albums do not necessarily present linear time. Due to the temporality of the *here-always* of the Internet as well as the postmodern temporality of the perpetual present, Facebook photo albums are not bound to presenting chronologic experience. We will explore the melding of past and present in more detail a bit later. Secondly, Facebook profiles are concerned with the presentation of an individual's identity and not necessarily concerned with the creation of familial identity. Thirdly, while the process of editing, revising, and constructing the album remains the same, Facebook photographs are not confined to mere tourism. Continuous conversations in the form of comments mean an image is constantly gaining and losing importance. The facial recognition software actively engages Facebook users. The social network's algorithm has the ability to recognize an individual with fairly reliable accuracy. This technological recognition is not insignificant, nor should it be treated lightly. Recognition and naming are powerful acts. The software's ability to identify individuals allows users to feel relevant, recognized, and remembered.

By receiving recognition from the institution of Facebook, its users have momentary proof that their faces are etched into the metadata, undying and permanent. This certification and visibility in the digital community also signifies a panoptic impulse. This panoptic recognition helps us understand Mae from *The Circle* and her desire for proof of her existence. Because users are recognized through an algorithm, their physical representation is mathematically retained, stored for future reference and proof of the subject's existence. We can also return to

Mae from *The Circle* in order to acknowledge that the identity is constructed through outside perception and recognition. Riley also confirms this process: “the daily fact of societal description ‘from the outside’—how I’m reported by others, what’s expectantly in place, already chatting about me before I appear on stage—is integral to the dialectic of self-description” (7). This moment of outside recognition is a crucial part of the process of Facebook identity and is latently discoverable in the seemingly innocuous question posed by Facebook: “Do you want to tag so-and-so?”

Whether the Facebook photograph is uploaded directly to Timeline or placed in a photo album, the initial moment of uploading signifies the initial memory of the physical event that has been selected for memorialization. The placement of the photograph is representative of some truth or value relevant to the subject. Moreover, the uploaded photograph is part of the panoptic impulse of visual subjectivity.

This initial upload also allows the user to interact with the photograph by inscribing its significance through the art of captioning. The initial upload also allows other users to generate some sort of commentary about the uploader’s experience. The uploader, in turn, often interacts through the comment feed, participating in what can become an infinite dialog. While the photograph’s Spectrum may be sealed forever, the photograph’s digital reality is continuous, locked in a perpetual present. Once uploaded, a photograph becomes embedded in the lives of other Facebook users. The photograph becomes collective, shared, and lived through Barthes’ “new social value” of “the publicity of the private.” The digital interaction surrounding the photographic representation of reality *becomes* an event that happens in simulation, as suggested by Turkle—not in the physical world. While the Facebook user may pause physical life for the

sake of capturing moments, the user interacts with the photographic representation of a moment online.

Meaning and memory are assigned to an individual's personal narrative when the photograph is uploaded to the social network and placed in the public sphere. One of the ways to explain this strategy of meaning creation is through Walter Benjamin's observations in "A Short History of Photography." Benjamin indicates, "the future is nesting" in a photograph (202). On Facebook, the "future" importance and significance of a photograph is always "nesting" in the minds of the social network users. Because, as Kuhn states, memory is "a never ending process of making, remaking," the meaning of the photograph is not particularly stable (19). As time progresses, a particular photograph may gain importance and relevance to a Facebook user. Similarly, a photograph may lose relevancy as well. The ability for a Facebook photograph's narrative potential is another demonstration of the Calliope Impulse. Furthermore, the interconnected discourse of memory and photography aids "our understanding...[of] how we construct our own histories through memory, even how we position ourselves within wider, more public histories" (Kuhn 46). One of the ways this more globalized positioning occurs within Facebook is through hashtags: #.

Facebook users have the ability to "hashtag" important information. According to Joanna Stern in "#Ready? Clickable Hashtags Are Coming to Your Facebook Newsfeed," when a "hashtag is included in a post, clicking on it will pop out a feed that aggregates other posts that have been tagged with the same phrase" (Stern 1). The hashtagging feature has the potential to greatly increase the visibility of a particular post or photograph. Of course, the ability to see "the larger view of what's happening or what people are talking about" is still under the control of an individual user (Greg Lindley qtd. in Stern 1). The "hashtagged posts will still respect the regular

privacy settings” (Stern 1). Even with some users electing to keep their hashtags private or confined to their immediate social network, hashtagging reveals how users can insert personal experiences into “wider, more public, histories” (Kuhn 46).

Furthermore, the sensation of hashtagging also develops the perpetually “nesting” potential of any given Facebook photograph. Photographs on Facebook have the ability to remain perpetually “nesting” because these photographs possess the capacity to evolve over time, particularly through the use of hashtagging. The implementation of the shared photo album, #throwbackthursday, and #flashbackfriday, are three interconnected occurrences that make perpetual reality possible. All three features allow for the uploader and the uploader’s social network to revisit past photographic events and reterritorialize the meaning of the photograph.

The shared photo album feature allows any user the ability to select a photograph and repost it through Timeline. This feature facilitates the nostalgic #throwbackthursday and #flashbackfriday. Both hashtags allow users to re-engage old pictures—sometimes flattering, sometimes humiliating—in order to re-assess the importance and memory of the photographs. Kuhn suggests this revisionary process is part of memory-work. She offers “(m)emory, it is clear, does not simply *involve* forgetting, misremembering, repression—that would be to suggest there is some fixed ‘truth’ of past events: memory actually *is* these processes, it is always already a secondary revision” (italics in the original 158). The nostalgic hashtags allow a user to continuously recreate the past-in-the-present. Older photographs have the ability to become constantly revised, becoming either more or less important than they were in their original upload.

One of Facebook’s 2013 developments was the introduction of the shared photo album. Debuted in late 2013, this feature allows the primary user to designate other users as co-

contributors on a specified Facebook album. This inclusive feature reiterates the public nature of Facebook photographs and the way in which the memory of an event belongs to a larger, social discourse. The networked nature of Facebook photographs and the ability for other users to tag or contribute a photograph into another's profile demonstrates the narrative-bend of the Facebook profile. But what happens when a photograph is added that does not properly align with the cohesive identity already in place? Users always have the option to either hide the photograph from Timeline or untag themselves. If the photograph is offensive, users have the option to report the image to Facebook and appeal for removal. These features help police identity and are ways of ensuring only the desired self-descriptions are visible. As Riley suggests, the selection of self-descriptions is done out of the desire to "show myself truly and to make it certain I have been properly read" (51). This act of revision is potentially infinite; photographs on Facebook may be violently deleted and removed if the photographs are no longer in service of the user's truth.

In the twenty-first century, photographs are not passively sitting in a photo album. Photographs have evolved into the language of Facebook, an equally valid way to engage the act of memory and the process of immortalization. The "selfie" photograph is worth mentioning, particularly within the context of immortalization. The "selfie" photograph requires an individual to occupy the position of the Photographic Triad. In this circumstance, the Operator turns the camera towards the self. The face of the Operator becomes the Spectrum of the photograph. Before the Operator uploads the selfie onto Facebook, the Operator acts as the Spectator, inspecting the image, making sure the image captures the correct mood. The advent of selfie provides us another opportunity to explore how this split subject allows for the commodification of the individual, and through commodification, a glimpse of immortality.

CHAPTER 4 WHAT ECHO SAID: ON FACEBOOK PHOTOS AND IMMORTALITY

Photography transformed the subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Make Me Immortal with a Click

The Facebook profile offers users a way to confront mortality through the inclusion of photographs. Barthes indicates that “Death must be somewhere in society...perhaps in an image that produces Death while trying to preserve life” (*Camera Lucida* 92). Following Barthes’ logic, a “selfie” photograph forces a confrontation with mortality. This unsettling confrontation with death is explored in great depth in Ernest Becker’s book *The Denial of Death*. Becker claims society allows individuals to earn an “immortality project” by “carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value” with the “hope and belief...that the things that man creates in society...outlive and outshine death and decay” (5). While Becker maintains that the immortality project is an unchanging function of human nature, it is worth noting that sociohistorical circumstances continuously augment the endeavor of self-presentation. In the digital age, the immortality project is directly related to digitization and consumerism.

The splitting of the subject forces the self to experience itself as other, as object. When users log into Facebook, they are confronted with the fragmented nature of the self and given an awareness of the constructed nature of identity. But, what happens to the other-self, the one split by language? On Facebook, this object-self becomes a commodity. Self-promotion and commodification occur on Facebook, but this is less of a fact of cultural narcissism than it is a

by-product of a consumer society in late-capitalism. Twenge and Campbel properly assess, but fail to properly diagnose the ways in which Facebook users “packag[e] themselves like products to be sold” (1). One of the ways to understand the nuances of this is through the idea of the “prosumer.” In “The Shift from CONsumers to PROsumers,” Susan Gunelius indicates that

(i)n the simplest terms, people have moved from being CONsumers to PROsumers with far more influence than ever before... The term ‘prosumer’ has transformed from meaning ‘professional consumer’ to meaning ‘product and brand advocate.’ Rather than simply ‘consuming’ products, people are becoming voices of those products. (1)

What is most significant about this shift from consumer to prosumer is that on social media sites like Facebook, users brand themselves for public consumption. Gunelius’ article only deals with the ways a business can take advantage of this marketing tool, but her theories about the role of the prosumer can certainly extend into the ways in which Facebook operates for individuals. Gunelius indicates that one of the ways to take advantage of the “social web [is] by creating your own branded destinations such as a blog, YouTube channel, Twitter profile, Facebook group or fanpage” (2). The idea of the “branded destination” is directly transferable to a user’s profile page. The photographs help create what appears as a cohesive identity for an individual.

Facebook photographs are traded and exchanged on the social network. For identity on Facebook, the currency is not monetary. Instead, we trade for visibility, for recognition, for proof of our existence. As visual subjects, we upload photographs as a result of our visual subjectivity. We exist through the external gaze of our peers on the social network, but also through our own external gaze as split subjects. On Facebook, the economy is steeped in theories of visibility and observation, manifesting as the accumulation of likes, comments, and shares. The ability to

circulate the self on Facebook means that the self becomes a visual commodity to seek preservation from death through the act of commodification.

Facebook memorial pages are an excellent avenue to explore the intersection between Facebook photographs, visibility, and immortality projects. In “Facebook Rethinks the Fate of Your Post After You Die,” Zach Miners offers,

[w]hen a Facebook user dies, the person’s mourners can ask Facebook to memorialize the account. Until now, if an account was memorialized its visibility was restricted to friends only...But starting Friday, memorialized accounts will be left as they are, so that the posts are visible to whomever the user intended. (1)

This is significant because other users can still interact with the digital identity of the deceased. Moreover, the memorialized account becomes something like a museum because these accounts “cannot be modified in any way. This includes removing friends, modifying photos or deleting any pre-existing content posted by the person” (*Facebook Deactivating, Deleting and Memorializing Accounts*). The Facebook photographs originally uploaded by the deceased remain and “depending on the privacy setting of the deceased person’s account, friends can share memories on the memorialized Timeline” (*Facebook Deactivating, Deleting and Memorializing Accounts*). On these memorialized accounts, we find that photographs do in fact contain a “nesting” memory, capable of being imbued with new significance and new memories as time progresses.

On Facebook, we find that photographs are constantly returned to the living through the use of hashtagging, and sharing. Facebook photographs are the sites of the digital native’s immortality project because photographs are a strange act of preservation. In *What Do Pictures*

Want, WJT Mitchell indicates that the “living organism has two logical contraries: the dead object (the corpse, mummy, or fossil), which was once alive, and the inanimate object (inert, inorganic), which was never alive. The third opposition, then, is the return (or arrival) of life in the nonliving substance” (51). Mitchell indicates that this is true of photographs in general. We can see the enactment of “the return (or arrival) of life” in the Facebook photograph as well. Because the future meaning of a photograph is always “nesting” and memory work is always a process of “secondary revision,” I would like to position Facebook’s role as an imagined community as one that is tethered to the continuous production of an individual through acts of memory and immortalization.

Between the Idea and the Reality

One of the ways we can understand how Facebook photographs function as part of the emerging generation’s desire for an immortality project is through visibility. In “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault introduces the idea of the heterotopia: a paradoxical space that is simultaneously physical and mental. Foucault explains the intricacies of the real-unreality of heterotopia by explaining the spatiality of a mirror, indicating,

[t]he mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives me my own visibility to myself that enables me to see myself where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am, since I see myself over there... The

mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (232)

The space of Facebook, functions in a similar way to the heterotopia of the mirror. We can understand Facebook, and the photographs on a user's profile, as a kind of heterotopic mirror whose reflection shapes the user's understanding of the self.

Because a user's Facebook profile includes photographs from various years and potentially various geographies, a profile page becomes a "heterotopia of time." Foucault theorized that the museum exemplified a heterotopia of time because museums spatially confine objects from various times and locations in one location. Moreover, objects in a museum exist in the same temporality Barthes attributed to photographs: "an illogical conjunction of the *here-now* and the *there-then*" ("Rhetoric of the Image" 278). Like a photograph, objects in a museum are collected in effort of preservation, of actively denying decay: a link between heterotopia and photographs.

Like the museum, the Facebook profile promises to shield the user's mind, thoughts, and appearance from time and death. As an act of memory and memorialization, photographs contain a particular power: the dual knowledge of life and death, absence and presence. Photographs allow for the Spectrum to endure, to remain fixed in a slice of time. This act of preserving a live moment is also an acknowledgement of human mortality because the Spectrum will continue to age in physical life. Barthes expressed this dual knowledge as well: "Ultimately, what I'm seeking in the photograph taken of me is...Death: Death is the *eidos* of that photograph" (italics

in original *Camera Lucida* 15). The photographs placed on Facebook also contain this tension between life and death, but the death anxiety becomes displaced because of the *here-always* temporality of the Internet. It is because Facebook photographs undergo the third temporality of the *here-always* that a Facebook profile becomes an attempt for immortality.

Foucault says, “I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surfaces” (232). This echoes Barthes’ description of the self in the photograph as a “cunning dissociation of consciousness when I look at ‘myself’ on a piece of paper” (*Camera Lucida* 12). The connection between the heterotopia of the mirror and the heterotopia of the photograph is crucial for my argument because these two points are also related to Lacan’s space of the screen. It is in the heterotopia of the mirror, photograph, and Facebook profile when the self is visually reminded that the narrative of a singular, cohesive identity is fiction.

The self-reflective nature of the Facebook profile may cause the user to understand Walt Whitman’s famous line from *Song of Myself*: “I am large, I contain multitudes” (194). It is this uncomfortable moment of the self-as-other that the Facebook photograph occupies. Due to the split nature of the subject, the self-presented online does not necessarily have to be congruent with physical identity. After all, the cohesive self is not possible. The presentation of identity on Facebook is mythic, imbued with constructed cohesion and stability. The very fact that digital and physical identities do not have to align confirms our ability to experience “multiple realities” that are all equally valid, equally constructed through language (Vitanza 3). One way to understand how multiple realities or identities function is noting how an individual can be a sibling, a spouse, and a child. These three identities are all different from each other, yet each identity exists aside the other. The Facebook self and the physical self are similarly situated

realities that can coexist, particularly after the myth of cohesion is dispelled. Again, Whitman seems apt, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself” (194).

The combination of the revisionary act of memory, the (limited) social ownership of Facebook photographs, and the implementation of hashtags, signifies that Facebook photographs have the potential for continuous interaction long after the death of an individual user. The integrity of a user’s identity remains when the user is present or absent. In this way, the Facebook photograph embodies Foucault’s observations regarding the desire to create a heterotopia is related to the modern desire

of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all time, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place. (234)

On Facebook, we create “general archive” for individual identity; through the implementation of hashtagging, we have begun to think of ways to insert our personal identities and experiences into larger cultural movements.

We will perform a great disservice if we believe that Facebook is the only place where identity is actively constructed. In reality, Facebook is a symptom of our visual subjectivity and our panoptic impulses. Facebook identity construction holds a mirror to the processes and ways in which our identities are “warranted” through the exterior forces like ideology, race, sociohistorical circumstances, and socioeconomic positions. Facebook identity construction calls attention to our fictionalized physical selves. Moreover, Facebook identity construction reveals how our very subjectivity is based not on authenticity, but on complex network of visibility and

concealment. The presentation of identity on Facebook is not narcissistic, but panoptic. The reason we photographically report our accomplishments, our *normalcy*, to the social network is because we have internalized surveillance, internalized the need to be visibly identified as operating in certain social bandwidths of acceptability.

In order to rescue the Facebook self from triviality, we must recognize that the very notion of the self requires an externalized gaze, an audience. As split subjects, language forces us to view ourselves from a third person perspective. The creation of the subject through external forces is part of our contemporary experience. It is this experience of visibility that is enacted and replicated on Facebook. The Facebook photograph, more than anything else in our society, clearly shows us the way the public gaze impacts the construction of the *self*.

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